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## On The Practical Need To Examine Climate Change Policy Issues Through An Ethical Lens

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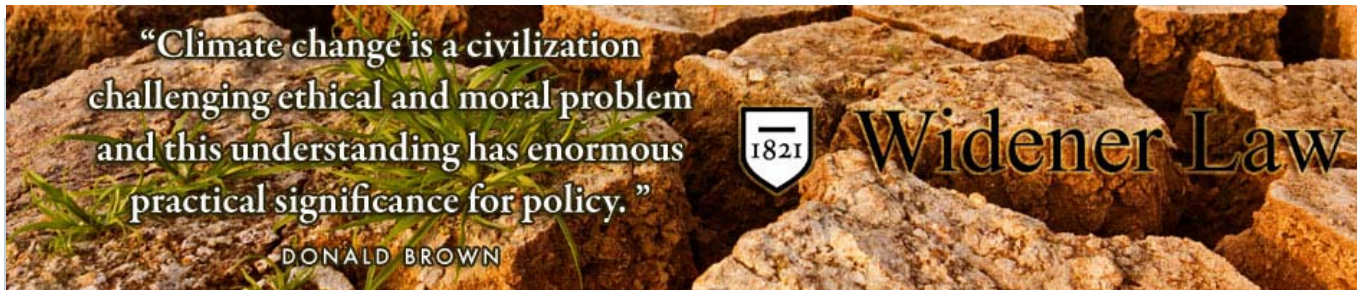
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# Ethics and Climate

Donald Brown



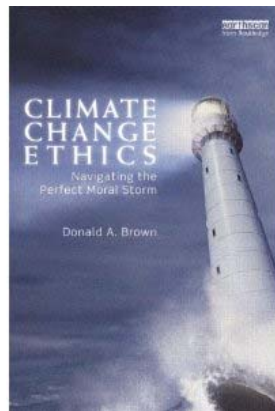
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## On The Practical Need To Examine Climate Change Policy Issues Through An Ethical Lens

2-17 DC rally 9.jpg

Although infrequently, one occasionally hears acknowledgement in US public discussions about climate change that human-induced warming is a moral issue. US President Obama, for instance, recently acknowledged that the US Congress should act for the purpose of protecting future generations in his State Of the Union Address.



Hardly ever, however, does the public debate about climate change policy acknowledge the significance for policy formation if climate change is a moral issue. In a new book, **Climate Change Ethics: Navigating the Perfect Moral Storm**, this writer examines the thirty year climate change policy debate in the United States in significant detail and concludes that climate change policy arguments for and against action on climate change have been

exclusively argued in the languages of science and economics, technical languages that often pretend to be “value-neutral.” Ethical examination of policy options have been almost completely absent from the public debate and the US press has completely failed to cover the obvious ethical and justice issues raised by climate change despite the fact that some vulnerable nations have been raising justice issues in international negotiations for over twenty years.

In addition, even those who acknowledge that climate change is a moral problem often argue that the only way to get US citizens to respond to climate change is to appeal to their self-interest. Thus, these people often advise those trying to get US citizens to support climate change policies to talk about the adverse impacts to the US that are predicted to motivate support for climate change policies. That is, frequently one hears some claim that US citizens will not respond to ethical arguments about duties of the United States to not harm people in Africa or Asia. For this reason, when potential adverse harms from climate change are discussed in the United States the examples given are most frequently climatic events in the United States such as hurricanes Katrina and Sandy or droughts in the US Midwest.

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Very rarely are links between US greenhouse gas emissions and killer droughts, floods, storms and sea rise around the world discussed during US climate change debates. Even rarer are ethical issues identified when specific proposals for climate change legislation or policies are under discussion in the public media.

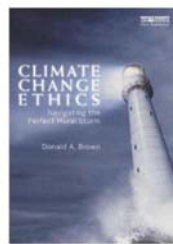
It would appear that, to the extent that climate change is understood to be a moral issue in the United States, it is understood solely as a potential motivating consideration for taking any action on climate change. For many there is no practical value in making moral arguments because appeals to self-interest are deemed to be stronger motivating influences. And so, even those that see climate change as an ethical and moral concern often ignore the moral dimensions of climate change when arguing on behalf of climate policies.

### Navigating The Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change Ethics

A New Book By Donald A. Brown That Explains How To Make Ethics Influential In Climate Policy Making

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Given this reality, one might ask why is it practically important to see climate change policy issues as raising important ethical issues.

As we have explained frequently on Ethicsandclimate.org, climate change is a problem with features that particularly require that it be seen as an ethical problem even more than other environmental problems. Those features include that it is a problem that is being caused by some people in one part of the world who are putting others in another part of the world who have often done little to cause the problem at great risk. Secondly the harms to those at most risk are not mere inconveniences but catastrophic harms to life and natural resources on which life depends.

Finally climate change is a problem of about which the victims can do little to protect themselves by petitioning their governments. The victims' best hope is that the those high-emitters causing the problem will see that they have duties to the victims to avoid harming them. And so, the ethical dimensions of climate change are important to understand because unless those nations and individuals that are emitting greenhouse gases at high levels reduce their emissions in accordance with their ethical obligations, climate change will exacerbate the injustice in the world and cause great harm to hundreds of millions that have done little to cause the problem.

And so, people around the world should respond to climate change in accordance with their ethical obligations because it is the right thing to do. Yet in addition to the moral reason for acting ethically, there are numerous **practical** reasons for framing climate change policy issues through an ethical lens because these policy questions cannot be thought about clearly without an ethical framing.

Ethicsandclimate.org has sought to identify and examine ethical issues that must be faced in climate change policy formation. This site now includes over 100 articles and 11 videos that look at ethical issues that have arisen in the discussions about climate change policies over the last six years.

As we have demonstrated in Ethicsandclimate.org, the following controversies entailed by the need to develop policy on climate change **cannot** be thought about critically and clearly without considering the ethical dimensions of these issues:

1. Setting an atmospheric greenhouse gas stabilization target. (***Ethical issues in setting an a ghg atmospheric stabilization level include the need to protect the most vulnerable around the world in the face of scientific uncertainty about climate sensitivity.***)

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US Congress and climate change ethics

2. The selection of a warming limit for implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. ***(Ethical issues that must be faced include the need to protect the most vulnerable given that any increases in global temperatures will harm some people in some places and scientific uncertainty about where thresholds that will trigger rapid non-linear climate system responses are not known precisely. These question raise clear ethical issues.)***
3. Allocating responsibility among nations, sub-national governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals to reduce the threat of climate change. ***(This issue entails numerous ethical issues that cannot be avoided in policy formation in regard to how to allocate responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions reductions given differences among nations, sub-national governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals in emissions on a per capita basis, historical responsibility, and financial ability to take action among other ethical considerations.)***
4. Economic arguments in opposition to or in support of climate change policies. ***(There are numerous ethical problems with economic arguments that are frequently made against climate change policies on economic grounds including the implicit denial of obligations, responsibilities, and duties to not harm others, the implicit rejection of the well established international law norm that polluters should pay for the harms of pollution, the inapplicability of cost arguments if the harms are violating human rights, numerous ethical problems with "cost-benefit" analysis that are used to justify non-action on climate change including the frequent failure to disaggregate harms and benefits, issues with the discounting future benefits and numerous other ethical problems with some costarguments made in opposition to climate change policies.)***
5. Scientific uncertainty arguments in opposition to or in support of climate change policies. ***(Decision-making in the face of scientific uncertainty raises numerous ethical issues including who should have the burden of proof, what quantity of proof should satisfy the burden of proof, and do potential victims of climate change impacts about which there is some uncertainty have rights to participate in decisions that could adversely affect them, and many others.)***
6. The climate change disinformation campaign compared to responsible climate change scientific skepticism. ***(The well-documented climate change disinformation campaign that has flourished in the United States and several other countries for the last 20 years raises numerous ethical questions including ethical problems with telling untruths about climate change science, ethical questions about norms that should be followed by responsible skepticism, whether the disinformation campaign is some kind of new assault against humanity and many others.)***
7. Who should be responsible for needed adaptation to climate change? ***(The need for adaptation particularly in poor vulnerable countries raises numerous ethical questions about who should be responsible for adaptation costs, how to prioritize adaptation needs, and who gets to decide how funding will distributed among adaptation needs among***

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Dan on A video: Why Politicians May Not Rely On Their Own Uninformed Opinion On Climate Change Science.

Donald A. Brown on A video: Why Politicians May Not Rely On Their Own Uninformed Opinion On Climate Change Science.

others.)

8. Who should be responsible for loss and damages from climate change?  
*(Because damages and losses from climate change are being experienced by some people around the world that have been caused by the activity of others, determining criteria for who should pay for damages and losses are ethical matters.)*
9. Whether politicians can ethically rely on their uninformed opinion of climate change science to justify their position on climate change policies. *(Politicians who have the power to prevent their constituents from harming others through the release of greenhouse gases have ethical duties not to rely upon their own uninformed opinion about climate change science.)*
10. The justifiability of commercials and advertising designed to influence citizens about the need to adopt climate change policies. *(Fossil fuel companies and others with economic interests in preventing climate change policies from being enacted may not ethically mislead the general public on the science of climate change in advertising campaigns.)*
11. The extent to which high-emitting entities may rely on self-interest as justification for reducing the threat of climate change. *(No high emitters of greenhouse gases may justify their emissions on self-interest based arguments alone, something they frequently do, but must acknowledge that they have duties, responsibilities, and obligations to reduce the threat of climate change.)*
12. Issues raised by technical solutions to climate change such as geological carbon sequestration, nuclear power, geo-engineering, wind power, and solar power. *(All technical solutions to climate change including biofuels, geo-engineering, nuclear, wind, solar, and other renewables have some negative impacts that need to be ethically evaluated in the context of the enormous adverse impacts caused by climate change.)*
13. Whether nations may wait to take action on climate change on the basis that new less costly technologies to reduce the threat of climate change. *(Whether a nation may wait to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that exceed its fair share of safe global emissions on the basis that new less costly technologies will be invented latter is an ethical matter.)*
14. Whether a nation may justify its refusal to take action to reduce the threat of climate change on the basis that other nations have not acted. *(This justification for not taking action is deeply ethically problematic.)*
15. Issues raised by cap and trade systems for managing greenhouse gas emissions. *(Cap and trade regimes raise numerous ethical issues including questions of distributive justice about how allowances are allocated, issues about the environmental sufficiency of the cap and trade regime, and how to resolve conflicts between environmental sufficiency and minimizing transaction costs among other issues.)*
16. The positions of individual politicians about climate change. *(Politicians supporting or opposing specific climate change policies frequently raise issues that can only be critically evaluated through an ethical lens.)*
17. The role and responsibility of the media in reporting on climate change issues. *(Given the enormous amount of potential harm from human-induced*

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**warming and a well-organized and well-funded disinformation campaign to undermine climate change science, ethical issues about journalistic norms for reporting on climate change science have arisen.)**

18. The appropriateness of attributing certain potential climate change impacts to human causation such as tornadoes and hurricanes. **(Some potential climate change impacts such as the frequency and intensity of hurricanes and tropical storms are not yet fully understood, however, once it is established by the scientific community that these impacts are plausible but not yet proven, ethical questions arise about whether these potential impacts should be identified in discussions about policy formation.)**
19. Procedural rights of victims of climate change to participate in climate change decisions. **(Occasionally nations have chosen not to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on the basis of scientific uncertainty or cost to their economy without consulting the potential victims of climate change in ways that raise questions of procedural justice.)**
20. The positions nations have taken in international climate change negotiations. **(Many nations have entered international climate negotiations taking positions based upon national economic self-interest and thus have ignored duties and responsibilities to others. An ethical analysis of these positions is needed to identify ethical problems with these positions.)**
21. The evaluation of outcomes of Conferences of the Parties under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. **(The evaluation of whether any outcome of any international negotiating session under the UNFCCC is acceptable is, at least in part, a matter of whether the parties have made commitments consistent with their ethical obligations.)**
22. The application of international legal norms to climate change policies. **(The development of an international climate regime on climate change should be informed by numerous international norms that have ethical significance including the “no harm,” “precautionary,” and “polluter pays” principles, and numerous soft-law principles on human rights and duties of sovereign states. The application of these principles to any climate proposed change regime raises ethical questions)**
23. Human rights and climate change. **(If climate change prevents human rights from being enjoyed by some people around the world, ethical analysis is necessary to evaluate what justifications for national positions on climate change are acceptable.)**
24. The creation of climate change law. **(Nations around the world are considering new laws on climate change. Although there are differences between legal and moral obligations, laws should be consistent with ethical obligations.)**

And so, an ethical framing of climate change issues is practically necessary to evaluate numerous policy issues that arise in climate change policy formation.

**By:**

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Scholar In Residence,

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Meta

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March 6, 2013 at 7:24 am

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Donald A. Brown

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*Donald A. Brown* says:

If the writer were to read entries on this website about catastrophic harm, he would realize that catastrophic harm is clearly the concern motivating the 100 articles on [Ethicsandclimate.org](#) The entry to which he is responding is not claiming that these sub issues are the most important ethical questions at all, they are simply issues that arise in policy formation that raise enormous ethical issues that cant be answered clearly without an ethical framing. These issues are also issues that prevent serious responses to climate change.

March 14, 2013 at 4:22 am

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